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Dr. Dorit Ben-Ami, Mr. Bryan Heinitz, Dr. Nancy Gee & Mr. Jamie Deans

You can access the Chair Letter online at: http://psych.vcu.edu

From the Chairman

An Experience of A Lifetime

It has been quite a journey to go from being an MCV Resident Physician to Chairman for over 35 years.

As I prepare to leave the Chair, I find myself reflecting on so many people who have enriched us and helped us grow. Residents and students have challenged us; faculty expertly and successfully juggling teaching, research, tough clinical problems and advocacy; our patients who are always our best teachers; and our community partners who have been fabulous advocates. Community support helps us know our work is valued and is a wonderful antidote to the stigma we often experience caring for the mentally ill.

Our field has advanced dramatically since my time as a resident. Back then, we had few medications and a very limited selection of psychotherapies. Outcome research studies were very limited. Just think of it! We have witnessed the rise of objective, meaningful scientific research – psychiatric genetics, brain imaging – new therapies like CBT, Motivational Interviewing, SSRI’s, Ketamine, deep brain stimulation, newer mood stabilizers, TMS, collaborative care, DBT and the DSM diagnostic system.

As the field has matured, so has our University, Health System and Department. We have Dr. Peter Buckley, a psychiatrist and Schizophrenia researcher. We have expanded our faculty from 20 to 85 full time faculty, 100 Clinical and Joint Faculty and have so many more wonderful, smart, caring residents and fellows. Our staff has been very loyal, hardworking and effective. Our nurses are the best and have national awards that emphasize this.

I am so pleased to welcome our new Chair, Dr. Robert Findling and his wife, Dr. Lisa Townsend, who is a Social Worker with expertise in Borderline Personality Disorder. Bob is an experienced and accomplished leader who will advance an already excellent, internationally recognized department.

Our residents and faculty are ranked No. 1 for teaching quality by our MCV students and we are in the Top Twenty in National Institute of Health funding in Psychiatry along with Hopkins, Stanford and Penn.

With bipartisan legislative support we were able to construct the new Virginia Treatment Center for Children, perhaps the best child psychiatry facility in the country. We designed the Jackson Center as our first adult outpatient psychiatry facility, specifically created for the needs of our patients.

Our faculty lead the world renowned Virginia Institute for Psychiatric and Behavioral Genetics, the Institute for Drug and Alcohol Studies, the Institute for Women’s Health and the Center for Human Animal Interaction.

The reduction in Stigma is one of the most important advances we, our patients and families have worked to achieve for decades. Stigma remains real, potent and harmful in so many ways. I am grateful for everyone who has spoken out and articulated the message that Mental Illness is real and treatable with great treatment outcomes.

Psychiatry is a key to the future of medicine because the brain is not only the most complex organ in the body but it is one of the most complex entities in the Universe. The brain controls so much of the body and obviously, all behavior, good and bad. So many of societies’
Dr. Robert (Bob) Findling will join us as Department Chair on January 1, 2020 and while visiting recently to meet division chairs he said “being invited back to Richmond is an absolute privilege”. He graduated the Medical College of Virginia in 1987.

"While it has been quite fulfilling serving children and their families in Baltimore" (Johns Hopkins), he is committed to "serving alongside our team in meeting our research, educational and clinical missions while also bringing my own deep sense of community service to my new position".

Dr. Findling is Triple Boarded in Pediatrics, Adult Psychiatry and Child Psychiatry from Mount Sinai Hospital. He did his undergraduate education at Johns Hopkins University and he holds a Masters of Business Administration from the London School of Economics and Political Science, NYU École des Hautes Études Commerciales de Paris - (Trium), 2011. He is licensed to practice in VA and MD.

Dr. Findling is looking forward to enhancing and developing new partnerships and will focus time and effort on both. He said “I have a lot to learn about “our way” of doing things.

I hope you understand why I am so proud of our Department and why we all must both celebrate and work hard to advance our mission to cure Mental Illness.

For me, leading the Department of Psychiatry has been an experience of a lifetime. It would not have been possible without my over-the-top wonderful wife, Phyllis, and to everyone who has mentored, advised and supported me.

As I pass the leadership baton, I will remain on faculty to teach and treat patients. The VCU School of Medicine Department of Psychiatry will grow from strength to increasing strength. Thank you all so very much. Be Proud!
I was born in Daytona Beach, Florida. I completed my Bachelor’s in Music Therapy at the University of Miami and also completed a Master’s in Communication Disorders from Appalachian State University. I have always been drawn to the service field. I originally thought I would be a teacher when I was a kid.

I have watched my career evolve over the years. I started working as a clinician (as a music therapist and speech therapist) and worked a great deal with individuals with Autism. I quickly found myself in train-the-trainer type roles. After a few years, I worked for an agency that worked with teachers and other organizational leaders to help build their capacity to provide best practice services for people with autism. Over the years, I have received additional education in organizational management and nonprofit management. I have really loved every aspect of every twist and turn in my careers and just embraced the change as it happened. I am a perpetual student and always learning new things!

About 22 years ago I first came to VCU when I completed my music therapy internship at VTCC. In 2013, I received a letter from the Advisory Council of VTCC and was invited to join their group. This renewed my involvement with VTCC. I was then thrilled to have the opportunity to get involved with the Children’s Mental Health Resource Center (CMHRC) and later to become the Program Manager in April 2018. I love connecting other organizations with our services and helping families find the resources they need. The social services system can be very confusing for families and it is good for them to have support on their difficult journeys.

On a weekly basis, we are in contact with families who express deep gratitude for the navigation services they receive from us. The thing we hear most often is “Thank you for taking the time to listen to my story.” It drives home the point that listening can be such a critical skill when serving families facing challenges. As someone who has come into the hospital environment after working in more educational settings, I have been greeted by a whole new set of acronyms, abbreviations and processes. I have learned a lot in my first year with VCU Health Systems!

When I’m not at work, you can often find me at the CSz Richmond Theater. I’m in the major league improv troupe and we do short form improvisational comedy. My husband and I started a nonprofit called CJ’s Thumbs Up Foundation in honor of our daughter, who died from a brain tumor in 2010. We provide weekly meals for families who are inpatient at both CHoR and UVA Children’s Hospital. I also serve on the board of Yes Balloon, the organizational body for the CSz Richmond Theater. I have been married for over 21 years to my husband, Roger. He’s a musician and radio DJ and also works for our nonprofit. In addition to our daughter CJ, we have another daughter, Prudense, who we adopted in 2015. She is 12 years old. We are a geeky, musical family that loves theater and musical arts and obsesses over Harry Potter, Star Wars, and the Marvel Universe!

My advice to those who ask me how they can do work like I do is to follow your passions and be ready to go where the job takes you. You don’t always pick a career after graduation that you will have until you retire. I love the work that I do and I love knowing that it may look a little different in a few years too. Keeps things interesting! CMHRC Team below left to right: Amanda Stephan, Zoe Bunnell, Kyle Mason, Robin Church and me.
Congratulations

- To Dr. Jim Levenson who is not only serving on one of the DSM 5.1 review groups but has also agreed to be one of the Editors for DSM 5-TR.
- To Dr. Ashley Harvin, PGY-3, whose poster won 3rd place at the conference in New Orleans recently.
- To Dr. Kogut and his team and Dr. Linker and her team for highly successful matches this year. All positions filled!
- To Dr. Roxann Roberson-Nay on her appointment as Assistant Dean for Graduate Recruitment and Admissions. She will coordinate recruitment efforts for prospective Biomedical Sciences Doctoral Portal students among her many duties.
- To Dr. Susan Kornstein who is the 2019 recipient of American Medical Women’s Association’s Lila Wallis Women’s Health Award which is given to an individual whose lifetime achievements, accomplishments, motivation, mentorship, energy and enthusiasm for women’s health, education and research reflect the trailblazing achievements and influences in women’s health exemplified by Dr. Wallis, one of AMWA’s Past Presidents.
- To Dr. Bela Sood who received the Virginia Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics Child Advocate Award which recognizes persons who in the course of more than a year had significantly contributed to the advancement of child health and welfare in the Commonwealth. Dr. Sood is also the 2020 APA winner of the Agnes Purcell McGavin Award for Prevention.
- We welcome the following new faculty who will be featured in an upcoming Chair Letter: Drs. Alexandru Trutia, Mr. Jacob Schmitz, Ms. Michele Cosby and Dr. Salim Zulfiqar (December arrival).
- To Dr. Ananda Pandurangi who was selected to receive the APA’s 2020 George Tarjan Award for Integration of IMG’s in American Psychiatric Medicine.

Condolences

- Sincere condolences to our Guard at the Jackson Center, Mrs. Wanda Scott, on the death of her husband, Mr. Michael Harvey.
- To the family and co-workers at UNOS of our handyman, Mr. Darryl Carter, we send our sincere sympathy.
- Condolences to Dr. Al Arias on the recent death of his father, Mr. Ricardo Arias.

Full Complement of Four Child & Adolescent Fellows for 2019-2020

Dr. Melorah Jacque: Melorah joined our program through a pre-match this past summer; she is a VCU residency graduate. She is a Captain in the U.S. Army Reserves and has training in ABA therapy and as a victim advocate and counselor.

Dr. Lauren Baker: Lauren graduated medical school at the University of Minnesota and is currently completing her third year of psychiatry residency at VCU. She was a Junior Chief Resident and has been very active in recruitment, the VCU Professionalism Committee, as well as wellness initiatives, helping to coordinate the VCU Schwartz Rounds.

Dr. Pankaj Manocha: Pankaj is coming to us from the BronxCare Health System, Mt. Sinai psychiatry residency program and graduate from Katsurba Medical College in India. He has also spent time at Emory completing his Master of Public Health as well as a great deal of research in cardiology and children’s mental health and substance use. He is an APA Foundation Leadership Fellow.

Dr. Devang Patel: Devang is coming to us from Wright State University psychiatry residency program and graduated from the Edward Via School of Osteopathic Medicine in Virginia. He has a Master of Healthcare Business Administration and has led community outreach projects and prevention strategies for underserved children with mental health needs.
Welcome Dr. Dorit Ben-Ami

My name is Dorit (like “Doritos”) Ben-Ami. I am a new clinical faculty at VCUHS since July 2019, when my husband, Dr. Richard Linsk, and I moved from Michigan to Richmond. The move was daunting, especially closing our large practice where we served about 2,000 patients. I had to separate from patients, the trainees, clinical and administrative staff that I managed. I also had to say goodbye to the Authority Health residency program in Detroit, affiliated with MSU, where I was the assistant program director and Neuroscience Curriculum director.

However, I am very excited about being in Richmond and starting with Department of Psychiatry to which I was recruited by Dr. Pandurangi. So far my experience has been that the work environment is very collegial, people in Richmond are friendly and helpful and I love the warm weather! Richard and I are hoping to make friends in the community. I grew up in a village on the hilly slopes of Jerusalem, Israel, before the hills were developed to the busy urban center they are now, so gardening and nature hikes with our dogs are my natural leisure activities.

I have been a psychiatrist for over 25 years, board certified both in Israel (Hebrew University Hadassah Medical School) and at the U.S, where I trained at the University of Michigan. I greatly enjoy my career - the engaged interactions with patients and their families, helping patients with the process of recovery, teaching, supervising and mentoring trainees.

Training and working for so long in places so culturally diverse has provided me with a chance to practice in almost every psychiatric setting and with every population and diagnosis, including high acuity and forensic inpatients; high-functioning patients in both hospitals and private practice; children; soldiers, veterans and law enforcement; probation clinics; substance use rehabs, C/L & Geriatrics. I practice a wide variety of long and short-term psychotherapeutic modalities. Thus, I earned the nickname “A psychiatric Swiss army knife...” ready to be deployed wherever needed. My current position is as a float on the inpatient units, which is combined with C/L and outpatient clinics.

My focus and research experience have been in PTSD, childhood trauma, and Borderline Personality Disorder, of which I co-authored a book chapter. It has been exciting to start a new clinic at the Jackson Center focusing on these conditions. On the research side, I dedicated the past seven years of my career to the study and application of biomarkers in psychiatry. I found that there are diagnostic tools out there that can significantly improve our understanding and diagnostic accuracy of mental disorders, and which could be available for clinical practice in the community. I would like to dedicate my research efforts at VCU to establishing the reliability and diagnostic predictability of these tools. These simple tests can be implemented in different psychiatric sub-populations – e.g. children, substance abuse, trauma, schizophrenia, etc., and therefore could be a good opportunity to collaborate with faculty who are interested in these disorders.

I am also interested in curriculum development for residents and medical students, and enjoy lecturing. I continue my collaboration with Detroit Authority Health GME in the development and implementation of an integrated Neuroscience-General Psychiatry-Psychotherapy curriculum, which potentially could be adapted to our residency program and student clerkships as well.

Thank you for your warm welcome and for allowing me the “soft landing”. I am looking forward to working with you all!

Welcome Bryan Heinitz

I am very excited to have joined the VCU Psychiatry team this past January working under Lynn Meyer in Development and Events. Prior to my current position at VCU, I attended Christopher Newport University where I received my degree in Arts Administration and found a passion for working with arts and non-profit organizations. I spent over 2 years working for St. Joseph’s Villa, a large Richmond non-profit that provides a range of mental health services to local children and their families, having worked at both their Sarah Dooley Center for Autism as well as the Day Treatment After-School program. In my career thus far, I have been lucky to get to work with and for children and mental health, which is why my position at VCU was so exciting to come across. In just under a year since my start, we have worked on events big and small, supporting children at the Virginia Treatment Center for Children and advocating on mental health awareness.

During my time away from work, I enjoy traveling the U.S. and internationally, always looking for new opportunities to expand my list of 9 countries visited thus far. I am also a huge beer nerd, having visited over 200 breweries in the country and abroad while testing out my home brewing skills as well. On a typical weekend you could find me walking the Capital Trail, enjoying Richmond’s outdoor activities, spending time with friends, and taking care of two rambunctious cats. With all that has been accomplished so far in 2019, I am looking forward to all that is to come for VCU Psychiatry in 2020!
Welcome Dr. Nancy Gee

Nancy Gee here, saying hello to all of my new colleagues in the VCU department. I have recently succeeded Dr. Sandy Barker as the Director of the Department's Center for Human-Animal Interaction (CHAI) which is probably most well known around here for our Dogs on Call program.

I am a native of California. I received my BA and MA in psychology from California State University, Fresno, then moved across the country to earn a Ph.D. in Psychology in the Cognitive and Neural sciences program (emphasis on human memory), from the University of South Florida in Tampa. I subsequently moved to cold and snowy upstate New York and split my time between teaching and research while at State University of New York, Fredonia.

I have always been passionate about dogs and have been involved in a number of dog related sports and activities, including having four therapy dogs. My initial interest in Human-Animal Interaction began when my curiosity was piqued by reports that children with developmental impairments functioned better before, during and after I brought my therapy dogs to visit their classroom. I designed a series of tightly controlled studies to assess whether the presence of the dogs could affect children’s physical and cognitive performance. Surprisingly, the results showed that it did! Working in my campus lab and in local schools I conducted additional studies to identify cognitive or physiological responses to the dogs’ presence.

Between 2014 and 2016 I took a break from teaching and the cold New York weather, and moved to England, to immerse myself completely in HAI research on behalf of Waltham, the fundamental science center of Mars Petcare. In this role I was instrumental in selecting research projects for funding and collaboration, in which I was involved from project design through to publication. After returning to the US I continued my association with Waltham on a consulting basis until I came to VCU in August.

It has become clear to me, through my own research and my evaluation of others’, that the presence of animals, particularly dogs, can positively impact human mental health and well-being, as well as physical health outcomes. We are seeing these results across the developmental spectrum and across a wide range of populations, but what we do not understand as yet are the circumstances under which exposure to the dogs may have the greatest impact, nor do we fully understand when, where or how these effects may reveal themselves. I do not believe that dogs (or any pet) are a panacea, and in my work at VCU I plan to conduct research that will provide us with a better understanding of underlying mechanisms as well as best-practices for best outcomes, while keeping the health and well-being of the dogs a priority.

I hope to continue the great work of the Center for Human-Animal Interaction that Sandy Barker has already achieved and to expand our understanding of HAI with a specific focus on how we can maximize the benefits of the human animal bond in delivering the wide variety of patient care currently underway here at VCU.

Welcome Jamie Deans

Jamie Deans came to VCU Health in 2008 after working in many different venues. Jamie has spent not only the majority of his career in psychiatry but also the bulk of his life in close proximity due to a family of helpers. As a child, Jamie grew up on the grounds of a state hospital- Southwest VA Mental Health Institute in Marion, Virginia. Both of his parents worked in the mental health field so Jamie has always had those around him who have lived and worked the experience of mental illness symptoms.

Mr. Deans has attended more colleges and universities than the average bear in his search for a path and a "life that matters." Beginning in the U.S. Army, then attending Va Tech, and New River Community College he found his vocation and passion after having volunteered at SWVMHI. Jamie made quick work of starting his path in nursing by becoming a Psychiatric Nurses' Aide, attending Va. Highlands Community College for his Associate's Degree in Nursing, and then later King College for his Bachelors degree in Nursing. It was during this time he met his wife Johnna who it just so happens will still have him. Jamie also has worked in Virginia's CSB programs with Mt Rogers CSB and Henrico Mental Health in the areas of PACT Team and Crisis Stabilization Units.

Jamie has one 11 year old son named Eli, his parents, two brothers and a sister who also live in Richmond, Va. Since 2008, Jamie has achieved his Masters degree for Healthcare Administration from this university, worked in inpatient psychiatry, now outpatient psychiatry, and as an instructor for de-escalation training. Jamie says he couldn't be any prouder than to serve alongside this VCU Psychiatry Team.